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HOW GOD HEALS

By Paul M. Miller

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Introduction

A Christian who knows personally the God of creation and the God of the resurrection does not have trouble believing that God can also heal a sick body. But how and when should a Christian expect healing?

Some earnest Christian friends will advise, "Let me take you over to the healing line at the big tent meetings. Haven't you heard of crippled people throwing away their crutches, deaf persons discarding their hearing aids, and cancer patients being cured? Jesus never turned away from sick people without healing them. Why not claim healing now?" But the sincere Christian pauses because he has heard about the many alarming reports of fraud, deceit, and exploitation!

Other equally devout friends will urge calling for the elders of the church to perform an anointing. Should one call for anointing as an act of faith that God can heal if it is His will, but at the same time implying one's resignation to live or die as He wills it? Scarcely two people have exactly the same intention and meaning in the ceremony when they share in an anointing service, and so how shall a sick person, for whom clear

thinking is especially difficult, decide which is the truth and what he ought to do?

In light of these uncertainties, it is no wonder that multitudes of Christians decide to rely upon both prayer and penicillin, but to expect the miracles of healing to come primarily through "miracle drugs" and skillful surgery. Somehow they feel that the way for the church to do her ministry of healing is to help build and staff hospitals, but not to stress the anointing service and the prayer of faith. These two avenues of God's working should blend and co-operate.

What are the triumphant certainties of divine healing?

God Can Heal

The God who created all life and gave to each person the life he enjoys is certainly able to prolong life. This must be asserted without hedging. There are seventy-nine stories of healing in the Bible, recording at least fifty-three separate incidents. He who created man's body is interested in bodily health and has no delight in seeing His loved ones writhing in pain. God watched over Israel's health in the wilderness, and healed through Elisha and Moses. God's Son healed in answer to faith, as is illustrated by the woman with an issue of blood, and the Syrophenician daughter. He healed when the faith seemed to be that of friends, as in the case of the paralytic borne of four.

Christ healed quite a few persons who were without apparent faith. Likely the high priest's servant had no faith that Christ could or would heal his severed ear. The maniac of Gadara may have been too confused

mentally to be said to have had faith. Peter and John healed the crippled man who was merely expecting money. William Orr says that one third of the healings of the Bible seem to be apart from faith on the part of the individual. Steegall says that the New Testament lists five persons who were healed who had faith and twenty-nine who apparently had none or very little.¹

God Does Perform Miracles Today, Including Miracles of Healing

The miracle of healing has never been so arresting and thought-provoking as in this age of naturalism and science.² A miracle may be defined as an act of God, called forth by baffling circumstances, in which He uses means unfamiliar to us, but perfectly normal to Him and consistent with His character. The so-called laws of nature are merely formulations of the partly understood part of God's ways of working. As we hear only a small part of the total range of sound waves in the air about us, so we see and understand only a fraction of God's ways of working in His world. God works equally through the familiar and the miracle.

When Christians pray for a sick friend, God can work in a still more remarkable way through some of His means of working which are beyond our comprehension. Through prayer God invites man into partnership in this higher and more mysterious part of His creating and restoring work in His world.³

It is good for man that God does not often inject miracles which interrupt the laws of cause and effect which He has ordained. If man could not be reasonably

sure that laws of gravitation or the laws of cause and effect will continue to operate in a predictable fashion, he would be unable to plan his work. Likely God should not be implored to work "miracles" except when a miracle is the only possible solution to the accomplishing of His will and purpose. The reverent Christian honors God's working in the familiar, too.

God Honors and Uses Means in Healing

In II Kings 20, God ordered Hezekiah to use a lump of figs for his boil. Naaman was to dip himself in the Jordan River, II Kings 5:10. Christ put saliva on a blind man's eyes, Mark 8:23. Paul urged Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach's sake, I Timothy 5:23. Christ implied that those who are sick need a physician, Matthew 9:12. When James urges the elders to anoint with oil as they pray for the sick member, this is likely to symbolize the prayer of the church that God will add His richest blessing to the medicines and services of the medical profession. Oil was much used as a medicine in the time of Christ. The Good Samaritan used loving care and poured in oil, and Christ commends both.

Christ also healed without the use of means. The man with the withered hand merely stretched it out in a response of faith, Mark 3:5. Christ used no anointing oil to heal Peter's mother-in-law, Matthew 8:14, 15. Sometimes Christ merely touched a leper in healing him, Matthew 8:3.

God Does Not Always Heal

God sometimes answers "no" to a believer's request

for healing. Paul's thorn in the flesh remained. Paul left his co-worker, Trophimus, at Miletus sick. Some Bible scholars think that another co-worker, Epaphroditus, may have remained sick for six months, and Paul showed deep concern for his health. Timothy had recurring illness or weaknesses, because Paul speaks of his oft infirmities. In none of these cases does the inspired Apostle rebuke his fellow worker for lack of faith or launch a healing campaign.

After the first few chapters of Acts, there is a decreasing emphasis upon spontaneous and "sign" healings, and the church turned to loving care and nursing of her sick rather than to insistence upon sudden healings.⁴

The temptation of Jesus teaches us that, under certain circumstances, the working of a miracle could become a sin. Jesus rejected Satan's suggestion that supernatural power must meet every human need regardless of God's will in the matter.⁵

God Desires Suffering to Be Redemptive

God found a way to redeem the world through suffering, and He longs to transform the sufferings human flesh is heir to into a redemptive experience. This does not condone the "blood bank theology" which asserts that Christ started a blood bank by His suffering death on Calvary, and that every time a Christian suffers for others he adds some blood to this blood bank. Paul does speak of filling up in his body the sufferings of Christ for His Church (Colossians 1:24), but the Greek words used to describe Christ's atoning sufferings and those of His followers are different words. His sufferings

could redeem, because He was God, giving His life to absorb man's enmity and thus welcoming back into fellowship those who repent. No mortal man's sufferings can equal Christ's atonement through His shed blood.

But, when saints accept their share of the suffering finite human flesh is heir to, and triumph through it by God's grace, allowing the suffering to refine their lives and draw them closer in dependence upon God, then God can use this spectacle of His grace triumphing in His saints to help draw and redeem others.

An aged Brethren in Christ bishop voiced it well when he said, "God places some of His saints on exhibition to show all others how much grace He has, if they should ever need to claim it." Someone has said that Christians are like tea: the flavor comes out best in hot water. Blessing has gone out to mankind through the way Fanny Crosby and other saints have learned to know God's grace while walking through some valley of the shadow in suffering. Job's ability to love and worship his God while enduring unexplainable suffering shows the way that faith can transform tragedy into triumph. When Israel can rise to the sublime faith that her sufferings can be redemptive for the world, then the prophet Isaiah predicts that Israel will bring forth God's Messiah, who will be the Saviour of the world by His innocent, vicarious suffering.

✓ It seems that the suffering which a godly person accepts in the spirit of worship and self-sacrifice renews and redeems him from self-centeredness and gives him fruitfulness in the very area where the loss is felt. In the plan of God a corn of wheat must die if new life is to be experienced. Poverty of spirit frees one for true

possession. Suffering lifts one above slavery to the pleasures of the world. Mourning can open the flood-gates of divine comfort.

Sister M. longed to be healed so as to give her life in service on the foreign mission field. She declared that she had faith that God could heal her body. Sincere friends assured her that they also had an inner certainty God purposed to heal. Friends wrote from far and near telling of healings they had experienced in answer to the prayer of faith and assuring her that this could be her happy experience as well. Christians gathered repeatedly to pray for her, and only the most cynical skeptic could hint that the mighty chorus of intercessory prayers which ascended in her behalf were not prayers of faith. Yet, God did not heal; He did not raise her up.

But God did assure her, "My grace is sufficient for thee." By accepting her thorn in the flesh and offering it up to God in the spirit of sacrifice and worship, her influence has become one of blessing and redemptive power. By allowing God to work through her in her infirmity and weakness, she has caused many other sufferers to learn that God indeed uses the weak things of the world. It is probable that God has received more glory by giving her the grace to triumph over her infirmity than He would have received had He healed her in a startling miracle.

The church should not encourage members to demand that God heal. They should be as willing to have Him answer, "My grace is sufficient for thee," as to have Him send unusual or miraculous healing. Sister M. still firmly believes that God can heal, but has accepted the fact that He does not will to do it in her case.

*God Has Set Us in Families—And So Even Innocents
Must Suffer*

God has joined men closely to one another so that blessings may flow freely from one life to another, but by establishing this law of relationships to mortals who have free will, God also had to allow it to happen that some innocents might suffer too. Both blessing and suffering come to innocent children because of the way God has joined them in His world, and this must be seen as an inevitable possibility of one of God's loving provisions.

Sometimes God does act dramatically in His world of cause and effect and ends the sufferings of some innocent one, but He does not always do so. The man born blind was certainly innocent when his suffering began, and he was allowed to sit in darkness for many years, so that one glad day God's mighty deliverance might rescue him from his innocent suffering.

Christians should not deify health, making it the highest good, and insisting God must always give it to them. Suffering can help redeem one's own life from its earthiness. The suffering Christian who has died a thousand little deaths to self by accepting his thorn in the flesh may be prepared for the final death to self. This whole finite life must finally be given up so that one can affirm and receive a larger and deathless life.

Suffering can help free a Christian from slavery to the material and physical and prepare him to live in the Spirit. When a suffering saint is allowing himself to be thus ennobled and refined, his life and example have a redemptive effect upon others.

Divine Healing Is Not Guaranteed Now Because of the Atonement

Professional divine healers insist that divine healing is in the atonement and that therefore it is a sin for a saint to be sick. They snatch at phrases and proof texts such as "I am the Lord who healeth thee," or stress the fact that looking at the brazen serpent, a type of Christ, healed Israelites. They argue by analogy that Christ cannot have a sick body, that the church which is His body must be a perfect body. They urge that "by his stripes we are healed," and "himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses," and that Christ commanded His apostles to heal as well as to evangelize.

In contrast to these assembled proof texts, the larger teaching of the New Testament is that the full effects of the atonement, the full redemption of the body, must wait for the resurrection. If healing were in the atonement, only the saints could be healed, but obviously God often heals non-Christians too. Furthermore, if healing were in the atonement, prayer should always bring it, but obviously Paul himself did not experience it or always expect it. Paul did not consider weakness and infirmity as an evidence of lack of faith, but said on the contrary that he gloried in his infirmities because then the power of God rested upon him. Paul outlined his Gospel in I Corinthians 15 and did not mention healing.⁶

The Christian who is sick should pray for healing in sublime confidence that God can heal if it be His will, but with the attitude of calm resignation if it should not be God's will. The attitude of the three Hebrew children facing the fiery furnace is the perfect example

—our God can deliver, but if He does not, we will accept His perfect will and never doubt His love. This is full confidence and faith coupled with humble resignation.

There is, however, a profound relationship between the atonement and the healing of a Christian's body, even though the atonement does not guarantee healing of every Christian now. Only the inner man is renewed day by day by the Spirit; the outer man will be completely renewed when saints see their Lord and are changed into His likeness. But sometimes the redemption of the body breaks through as an advance payment or foretaste of things to come. As sickness and death recoiled and were thrown back defeated before the power of Christ's person when He was upon earth, so the power of His working through the faith and prayers of His body, the Church, sometimes flames forth in miraculous restoration of a saint's sick body. Christians should expect this to happen periodically in the fellowship of resurrection life and power.

It is inevitable that there should be some tension and paradox since the entire Church is Christ's body, partaking already of the powers of the world to come, while no individual Christians yet possess their resurrection bodies. Here are the spiritual body of Christ and the fleshly bodies of men. In the bodies of Christians the eternal and fleshly meet, two aeons seem to ebb and flow, and sometimes the forces of sickness and death are thrown back as a preview of final resurrection and deliverance.⁷

God's Highest Will for Man Is Not Physical Health

God's highest will for man is Christlikeness, and not always perfect health. It is wrong to deify health or in

any way to make an absolute good of finite well-being. Prayer, faith, and righteousness should not be made mere helps to physical well-being. Healing itself should be seen as only a temporary postponement of an inevitable death. No one healed one hundred years ago is alive today. Many a devout Christian has felt that his life's work is done, has not struggled to postpone death, and in so doing has affirmed a larger life.

On the other hand, God is on the side of health. Christ entered the struggle of mankind against disease. God gave laws of sanitation, sterilization, isolation, rest, and diet so as to safeguard health during the Old Testament economy, and the Christian Church has always led out in medical missions, hospitals, and prayer and anointing services for healing.

Then, too, God has put recuperative powers within the body. In a very real way "He heals all our diseases" (Psalm 103:3). Disease is "dis-ease" and the most that human co-operators in the healing process can do is to help correct and remove mental or physical hindrances so that the curative powers God has put within the body are free to work.

The Biblical conception of a miracle, a sign, or a wonder is not limited to startling "supernatural," "miraculous" acts of God, since God works constantly in all of life. The most commonplace occurrence in nature and the "miraculous" act of raising a dead person to life are equally acts of God. A sign or a "wonder" is any one of God's acts which He does in such a way as to call persons to pause, ponder, and commune with Him.

Finally, God wills sufficient health so that persons can do the service God has for them to do. Paul had

his unrelieved thorn in the flesh and Timothy his oft infirmities, but both could do God's work they were called to do. Fanny Crosby and Isaac Watts had enough health and strength to do their lifework. God received greater glory from their lives because they rendered their service during and in spite of great weakness and even pain.

It Is Not a Sin for a Saint to Be Sick

Obviously some sicknesses are a direct result of the person's own sin, as God said Gehazi's leprosy was, but no one knows enough to decree which case of contemporary suffering is due to that person's sin. Christ exploded the notion that all suffering is the result of the sufferer's sin. Guilt should not be associated with sickness. A person wills to sin, but who ever wills to be sick? It is cruel and often drives an innocent invalid to despair to continue the false insistence that sickness is always due to the sufferer's sin. Sometimes when a person harbors hostility, tension, and suppressed guilt, his body may become sick through the strain which results, but no mortal man knows enough or is allowed by God to assume omniscience and decree that a given person's sickness is due to his sin.

Tests to Apply to Healings and Healers

Is the healing carried on under God's sovereignty, submitting to His power and will, and giving all glory to God and Christ? It is evident that there are demonic powers in the universe, too, from Pharaoh's magicians to pagan witch doctors. The surest test to detect whether it is the power of God's Spirit which is at work is to see

whether it gives all glory to Christ and whether the lives of the healers evidence the fruits of the Spirit. It is important that healing go on within the congregation where the fruit of the Spirit can be inspected.⁸

Is superstition mingled with it, using charms and tricks not consistent with Christian faith? Some pow-wow ceremonies are utterly pagan, such as praying that the Virgin Mary shall bear another son if bleeding doesn't stop, wearing a ring to prevent rheumatism, passing a baby through a horse collar three times to cure something, or making horsetail tea for diabetes.

Does the "healer" co-operate with the medical profession? Paul himself had the power to heal, but he took Doctor Luke with him. Physical and spiritual healing were kept many years as allies together under the leadership of the church. Not until the third century did Christians begin a purely physical approach to healing sickness. Herbs, drugs, hospitals, and doctors are also God's gifts of love to persons.⁹

Does the "healer" make healing supreme in the Gospel and the ministry of the church? Peter refused to be diverted into a shadow-casting campaign, even though the story was circulated that his shadow would heal. Many times Christ turned away from the crowds intent upon physical healing to go off to teach His disciples.¹⁰

Is the healing man-centered, rather than church-centered? James says that the elders, representing the entire congregation, shall come to the bedside of the sick member, symbolizing the entire body suffering with the suffering member. The prayers of the entire congregation should encircle the sick Christian who is being

anointed amid prayers of faith. The apostolic powers seem to have been forwarded, not to preachers, but to the whole obedient and praying body, the church.

Does the healer screen out the really sick ones? Does he cater to ones well enough to come to a platform in a public meeting, many of whom are doubtless neurotics who want attention and who are very susceptible to suggestion? If the healer really wants to heal the most needy ones, why does he not operate among the terminally ill in hospitals and convalescent homes?

Does the healer ask for money and publicity? Jesus urged, "freely give." He tried to avoid publicity and never asked for money. He was careful that as He sent out the seventy to teach and heal it should be by poor persons who were not on a fund-raising campaign. The *Didache*, a second-century writing, warns against preachers who come asking for money for themselves. Most modern "healers" operate in complete contrast with the humility and poverty of Christ and His disciples.

Healing Should Be Congregation-centered

It is likely that the sensational traveling healers have arisen as a judgment upon the church because she failed to surround her sick members with intense intercessory prayers of faith for their healing. The New Testament does not sanction the idea that the congregation should seek for preachers who have "the gift" in themselves. Titus and Timothy do not mention it as a qualification for an elder or bishop.

Recently, a number of stable and respected denominations have been giving attention to their responsibilities in healing. Of 982 ministers contacted in a study under

the National Council of Churches, 486 said they had conducted or shared in healing services. The *American Lutheran* magazine of September, 1955, notes that the entire worship gains in vitality when the congregation again takes up her ministry of healing. People again believe God addresses the whole man in the totality of his existence.¹¹

The Episcopal denomination is returning to definite prayer services for the sick. In 1957 the Order of St. Luke the Physician was formed to study the relation between spiritual and physical healing. Hundreds of highly respected doctors and ministers are searching for the will of God in relation to the healing ministry of the church. Already in 1951 the Commission on the Liturgy declared "throughout the Anglican Communion there is a large and growing movement to obey our Lord's command, to restore the healing ministry, not as a substitute for the work of the medical profession but in co-operation with it, especially in dealing with the spiritual causes of sickness."

In Philadelphia Dr. A. W. Price holds services for healing every Thursday afternoon and evening. One hundred members pray one hour each day for the sick in what is called "a prayer-healing fellowship." Dr. Price counsels in search of hidden envies and resentments which may be aggravating the sickness and refuses persons who will not also go to a medical doctor.

Among Methodists, respected leaders like Albert Day in Baltimore and Leslie Weatherhead in London hold services for healing. Among Presbyterians, an increasing number of congregations are including a concern for healing of their members. Dr. McLeod of the Iona

Community holds prayer services for the sick, relying upon the faith of a loving congregation, and includes prayers for the doctors and nurses as well as for the sick person.¹²

Dr. McLeod reports that there are more than one hundred and thirty congregations in the Church of Scotland which hold regular prayer services for healing.¹³

The faith of a praying congregation is one of the ways that Christians are laborers together with God in His work of giving health and blessing to His own. James reminds that it is not a true faith unless appropriate works accompany it. The works which must accompany the prayer of faith doubtless include careful obedience to the laws of health and wise use of the herbs and medicines which God has given for the service of man, together with confession of and cleansing from any attitudes of hostility and resentment which may be disturbing the wholeness of the person.

Suggestions for Prayer and Anointing Services for Healing

The entire congregation will need to be prepared in holy living, a faith based upon a study of the New Testament teachings, and a willingness to become members one of another at such a deep level of mutual concern that when one member suffers, all suffer with that member.

The sick person and the praying congregation should continue to pray, "not as I will but as Thou wilt." The same passage in James which urges prayer and anointing for healing also encourages saints to endure affliction

with patience like Job. In the same prayer in which Christians affirm their faith that God can heal and plead with Him to do so, they also make a fresh resignation to His perfect will in the matter. Even though some Christians think that they have discerned that it is God's purpose to heal in this instance, yet they admit their own partial wisdom as they continue to pray, "not my will but Thine be done."

Christians should not put God to the test by demanding unconditionally that God grant their wishes. There is a faith greater than that of answered prayer, the faith which resigns life itself into the hands of God, equally ready to live or die as He wills it. It requires a mature faith to discern whether God wills to heal or whether He is saying, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

The sick Christian should call for anointing, not as a thing of magic or extreme unction, but as a testimony to his faith in God's ability to heal, James 1:6. He should send for the elders to pray over him so as to represent the prayers of the entire congregation. It would be well if the entire brotherhood could be gathered in the church building in prayer for the sick member while the elders go to conduct the anointing service.

The sick Christian should continue to use the best medical help available. Oil may have symbolized all the medicines and may have been the Christian's way of asking God's blessings upon His gift of medicine and herbs which He gave for the service of men. God is in control of both worlds, the natural and the supernatural, the understood and the miraculous, the penicillin and the prayer power of Christians. To a reverent Christian the medicines, the care of the doctor and

nurse, and the prayer power of loving Christian friends are equally received as gifts from a loving heavenly Father.

Sins should be confessed, especially any repressed hostilities and guilt feelings which may be aggravating the illness. God's healing cannot flow into a life burdened with guilt and hostilities. This is both a natural law and a spiritual law.

The service should be brief, possibly including a reading of passages of Scripture such as James 5, the singing of a hymn like "My Faith Looks Up to Thee," an opportunity for confession or statement of faith on the part of the sick Christian, and the pouring on of oil during the laying on of hands by the elders. While hands remain laid on the sufferer's head the prayer of faith should be offered.

Christians should not too easily or too completely equate God's gifts in penicillin and "miracle drugs" with His gift of healing through the prayers of a believing church. Both are indeed God's gifts, whether they come through nature or supernature. Nature itself is the sphere of God's constant working and should point to and glorify the Creator. But the prayers of a believing congregation express Christian compassion in a way which nature does not do. The divine power which is released in a fellowship of obedience is more akin to the incarnation and the resurrection, when God acted through nature with supernatural, unexplainable power, through the physical and temporal with the spiritual and eternal "plus element."¹⁴

Christians should not strain after the sensational and the weird. Healings are reported from powwow and

witch doctors, snake handlers, worship of relics at Catholic shrines, Christian Science, hypnosis, and professional healers. The study of the relation between demon possession in the New Testament and certain mental illnesses and psychoses in contemporary society is extremely complex. Most Christians will be more confused than helped by dabbling into a study of demonism or the fringe groups who practice healing. Healing should be sought in the midst of an obedient congregation, where lives can be tested by the fruits of the Spirit, and where a continuing loving concern undergirds the intercessory prayers.

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